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ABSTRACT

The explanation of the anomalies that learning disabled students present depends on the discourse in which educators and researchers locate learning disabilities. The field of learning disabilities is a discipline in the midst of a paradigm shift in which the new discourses are incompatible with the field's basic tenets and assumptions. Behaviorist and medical discourses still dominate, but a cognitivist discourse of learning disabilities has emerged, as well as a whole language and social constructionist discourses. The trend to classify students as learning disabled is increasing. There is very little recognition outside the specialized literature that professionals in the field question the learning disabled diagnosis. Most people do not know that the field is in crisis and that eminent researchers concede that they cannot define or identify what they study. Analysis of the position of learning disabled students can lead to positive change, if the analysis leads to creation of more meaningful opportunities for learning disabled students to speak. Educators might be more sensitive to learning disabled students if they recognize their own experiences as learning disabled selves, such as in not understanding "new literary criticism" despite repeated intellectual effort. If teachers are sensitive to the ways learning disabilities are constructed, they can be better listeners. Teachers can talk with students with learning disabilities to help them recognize their abilities, and teachers can listen more carefully for what students can tell them. (Contains 24 references.) (RS)

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Stephen F. Austin State University
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Speaking for Students with LD

I want to begin with a brief sketch of my nephew Jamie. Jamie was classified by school systems in both Louisiana and Michigan as being learning disabled. He has attention deficit disorder; he took Ritalin. And at 17 he is a drop out, both from the traditional school program and from an alternative school. If you know much about LD, you can probably predict that in spite of all this, I think that Jamie is a pretty smart kid.

Jamie and his parents came to visit my husband and me last Thanksgiving. I noticed two things during that visit: one was that despite his biological inability to concentrate on schoolwork, Jamie spent hours at my computer. He was exploring the web site of a comic book character named Spawn of Evil–or something equally grotesque. I also noticed a curious lapse in Jamie's intelligence: He came into the living room once to ask his mother how to spell a name he wanted to look up on the Internet. She repeated the spelling to him several times, and I noticed that he very carefully rehearsed the spelling as he left the room. Later I found the piece of paper he wrote the name on when he got back to computer. As he walked from the living room to the den, he forgot the spelling.

How do we explain the anomalies that learning disabled students like Jamie present? To my mind, the explanation depends on the discourse in which we locate learning disabilities. And that is the subject of my talk today, how different discourses construct the learning disabled and what difference those constructions might make.

The field of learning disabilities is a discipline in the midst of a paradigm shift, one in which new discourses are incompatible with the field's basic tenets and assumptions. Learning disability is the creation of behaviorist and medical

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discourses, and these are still the dominant framework of the discipline. But in recent years, a cognitivist discourse of LD has emerged, as well as whole language and social constructionist discourses.

I'll begin with the behaviorist framework. In a behaviorist paradigm, Jamie's problems in school are caused by some minimal brain dysfunction or other neurological cause, subtle or limited enough not to affect overall intelligence. This way of explaining Jamie's problems in school is what most people recognize as LD. The diagnosis first gained prominence in the mid-sixties. Because researchers have not isolated a physical cause, the definition of LD is operationalized as a discrepancy between test scores. When a student is diagnosed for LD, he is tested to see if he does significantly worse on an achievement test than his scores on an IQ test would predict. That discrepancy is very important. The unexpected failure is what enables a clinician to identify a student as learning disabled, and it is the most salient feature of the diagnosis: we all know that students with LD have normal intelligence; they are not stupid, so the cause of their problems with schooling is mysterious. In fact, part of the LD lore is that it is the "affliction of geniuses": The popular LD literature has identified Einstein, Edison, DaVinci, Rodin, Woodrow Wilson, William James, William Butler Yeats, and General Patton as examples of eminent men who overcame their learning disabilities.

Several neurobiological causes have been hypothesized to explain the discrepancy between IQ and achievement among victims of LD. One is that LD is a perceptual deficit that prevents its victims from perceiving print properly–the earliest term for the disease was *congenital word blindness*. Other theories are that the learning disabled have incomplete brain hemisphere dominance; attention deficits; naming deficits, or language deficits that prevent them from segmenting the sounds in words the way normal people do. In all of these, the crux of the definition is twofold: the cause of the failure is biological, not environmental, and it is separate from overall intelligence.

From a social constructionist perspective, this assumption of a biological cause is problematic. When psychiatrist Gerald Coles analyzed the discourse of LD in his 1987 work, *The Learning Mystique*, he pointed out that despite years of well-funded and vigorous research, all of these potential neurobiological causes remain hypothetical. Many of the causes that gained wide acceptance at one time or another were subsequently rejected when the studies could not be replicated or were found to have serious methodological flaws

The behaviorist framework of LD has also been critiqued from the perspective of cognitive psychology. Keith Stanovich critiques the use of discrepant test scores as the basis for diagnosis. LD is operationally defined as a sufficient discrepancy between IQ and achievement test scores. But Stanovich says that LD researchers don't realize that when they base their diagnosis on IQ tests, they are on shaky ground because of conceptual problems with these tests. There is controversy among cognitive psychologists about what IQ tests measure. The tests focus on such a narrow range of skills that they don't measure what most of us would call intelligence. So it is no surprise that there are discrepancies between IQ tests and achievement tests, but it doesn't mean much. If you have two tests, and the first measures one kind of intelligent performance and the second another, there will be people with discrepant scores. It's a feature of the tests and thus can't distinguish something about the persons tested. It is also a misuse of IQ tests, Stanovich says, to assume that they measure the potential to be educated.

Stanovich thinks that there is a biological basis to learning disabilities, but that discrepancy between test scores is not a good basis for diagnosing these problems; it just muddles the concept. Stanovich also points out that the LD field has never questioned whether poor performance caused by a discrepancy between aptitude and achievement should be remediated differently than poor performance without the discrepancy. If there are these two groups (less intelligent students and intelligent but learning disabled students) there is still no evidence that they need different kinds of instruction or that their educational prognosis is different.

In the face of these criticisms, those specialists who would maintain a medical / behaviorist framework and justify their practice are in a difficult place:

Kenneth Kavale and Steven Forness, in their 1995 publication *The Nature of Learning Disabilities*, say that their field is in a continual state of crisis because it cannot define the basic phenomenon it studies: "The LD field faces a fundamental problem of providing itself with an identity. The perplexing problems confronting the LD field have defied resolution because of the failure to answer the question: "What is LD? . . . The failure to comprehend the LD phenomenon fully," they say, "makes us grasp for straws" (24).

Another LD specialist, Joseph Torgesen, in providing an overview of theory in the field in 1994, concludes that there is such a thing as learning disability but only in a scientific sense. It has been proven to exist, he says, but it hasn't been proven to exist in the population LD specialists treat. He wants to be tentative about his estimate, but he says that it probably affects only 15% of those identified by the schools as having LD. In 1992, the national average for students classified as LD was 4.71% of the school population, so if Torgesen's estimate is valid, maybe 7/10 of 1% of the school population is learning disabled (17).

However, the trend to classify students as learning disabled is going in the opposite direction. More and more students are classified as LD. There is very little recognition outside the specialized literature that professionals in the field question the LD diagnosis. Most people don't know that the field is in crisis and that eminent researchers have conceded that they cannot define or identify what they study.

I'd like to return to Coles' work now because I think that the social constructionist framework provides the best explanation for this confusing state of affairs. Coles points out that LD does important work for a society that believes in equal opportunity. Our culture's common sense discourse says that

learning is the result of individual ability and effort. When children don't learn, they must be either stupid or not trying hard enough. LD provides an alternative explanation that allows teachers, parents, and students to escape the blame that school failure otherwise assigns. It also works to protect the status quo. A physical disability locates the problem within the child; that means that systems and structures don't have to change. They simply need to adjust or adapt, to add special treatment for a newly recognized problem.

I would like to look at learning disability through one more lens today, the one provided by feminists Linda Alcoff and Trinh Minh-ha. Feminists ask us to notice that masculinist discourse is always implicated in relationships of hierarchy and dominance, so that when we look at students like Jamie through any lens, we should also be careful to notice our position relative to his. Presumably, those who do research in learning disablities are advocates for those they study. We speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. But this helping relationship is complicated by our position. As creators of academic discourse, we speak from positions of authority. The danger of this position is described by Trinh's description of Western anthropologists writing about "native" cultures when she says that anthropology is "mainly a conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them,' of the white man with the white man about the primitive nature man . . . in which 'them' is silenced. 'Them' always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless" (67).

The same might be said about our relationship to the students we discuss. We speak; they are speechless. All academic research is like ethnography in that we don't just discover the true selves of those we study and then present what we've found; we also create them and ourselves as we write; we and they are always representations. And our position is the privileged one: we are the subjects and agents of discourse; our students the object of our talk, that which is known. They are not agents.

If we look at the various ways I have described my subject this morning, the problem might become clearer: I haven't chosen my words with any particular

care–just used the language that I found at hand in the literature, and in the first five minutes of my talk these included disabled, disorder, deficit, blindness, disease, dysfunction, affliction, diagnosis, victim. It is clear that the medical model constructs these students in negative ways, in ways that help to make them powerless.

I've also talked about issues of measurement and testing, and used the metaphor of looking at these students through different lenses. Again, these are ways of talking that imply and reflect my agency and power and their subjection and passivity. Students are naked in the most humiliating ways when we think that our tests let us see inside them.

If we examine our own positions as researchers it is hard not to think that the discourse of learning disabilities has done more for those who speak it than for those who are spoken about. Despite the critiques I have cited, the field of learning disability flourishes; the students it studies on the whole do not. Many, like my nephew, have given up on schooling; I don't see that his condition is materially better than the condition of a student who has been told he's not very smart.

I know that there is danger in questioning the category of learning disability, as I am doing today, because these questions can be used in support of arguments that we should offer less help to students. Without the medical model, for most people, learning disabilities are not "real." As one of my students told me this summer, his mother said that his disability was that he was "dis" stupid. ("Dis" and "just" are homonyms in East Texas.)

I take this risk, acknowledging my own investment in presenting the result of my research and because I think that analyzing the position of learning disabled students can lead to positive change, if the analysis leads us to create more meaningful opportunities for learning disabled students to speak.

We will have to do more than ask students to tell us what it is like to have learning disabilities. No one, neither researcher or student is free to construct his or her position outside ideology, so a student diagnosed as learning disabled doesn't have an unmediated knowledge of truth that we can ask him or her about.

But we can ask learning disabled students to speak, in more sensitive ways. Part of that sensitivity might involve recognizing our own experiences as learning disabled selves. As I was listening to what Min Zhan Lu said yesterday about having experiences of both privilege and oppression, I began to think about my own experiences in terms of learning disability.

I thought about my childhood, which did provide several stories, but I realized that I have been learning disabled much more recently. During most of the 1980's I did very little reading in literary criticism; I teach at a school that did not emphasize scholarly productivity, and as writing center director I had many more pressing and immediate concerns. When I tried to read the new literary criticism, informed by theory that was just beginning to be discussed when I was a graduate student, I had a lot of trouble reading. I thought then that the problem was internal. I thought that I wasn't smart enough to understand Derrida or Bartholomae or Foucault--when I wasn't being suspicious that they weren't worth understanding. I know how frustrating it was to be unable to read, no matter how often I re-read or how hard I tried. And I know that I quit reading after too many futile attempts.

I lost my disability when our department began to hire new faculty, and I was invited to join conversations about these texts. From my own experiences as a learning disabled self, then, I know how important it is to belong to a community of learners. I know how important it is for me as a teacher to be generous in inviting students to participate in conversation, talking about Spawn of Evil as well as *Beloved* and *Ulysses*. We can enable students by joining them as well as by inviting them to join us.

And finally, if teachers are sensitive to the ways LD is constructed, we can be better listeners. When we talk with students with LD, we can help them recognize their abilities and we can listen more carefully for what they can tell us, that we haven't been hearing.

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